

# Marriage, a History

How Love Conquered Marriage



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If men and women were true soul mates, why should they not be equal partners in society?

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the doctrine that men and women had innately different natures and occupied separate spheres of life seemed to answer these questions without unleashing the radical demands that had rocked society in the 1790s.

The doctrine of separate spheres held back the inherently individualistic nature of the “pursuit of happiness” by making men and women dependent upon each other and insisting that each gender was incomplete without marriage. It justified women’s confinement to the home without having to rely on patriarchal assertions about men’s right to rule. Women would not aspire to public roles beyond the home because they could exercise their moral sway over their husbands and through them over society at large. Men were protecting women, not dominating them, by reserving political and economic roles for themselves.

But the tenets of separate spheres and female purity posed their own dilemmas. Even in the best of matches, how could two people with such different natures and disparate experiences really understand each other? And what about a match that went wrong? Should a “fallen woman” really have to marry the very man who had seduced and betrayed her? Did a man have to live thirty-five years with a wife who was less high-minded than she had led him to believe during courtship? Did a woman have to stay with a husband who did not respect her innate purity? These questions became more pressing as the aspirations for intimacy raised by the cult of married love came up against the rigid barriers of gender segregation. They were to become more urgent still when the struggles of working-class men and women and of middle-class dissidents showed people alternative ways of organizing personal life.

## Chapter 11

### “A Heaving Volcano”: Beneath the Surface of Victorian Marriage

It’s ironic that the staid Victorians—the same people who wrote glowing odes to married life and were so frightened of sexual impropriety that they said “white meat” and “dark meat” to avoid mentioning a chicken’s breast or thigh—opened the door to the most radical critique of marriage and most far-reaching sexual revolution that the West had yet seen. Who would have thought that behind their formal dress and sober portraits, underneath their preoccupation with chastity, their reticence about sex (even after marriage), and their syrupy sentiments about wives as “the angel in the home,” they were revolutionizing marital ideals and behaviors?

But in fact the new sentimentalization of married love in the Victorian period was a radical social experiment. The Victorians were the first people in history to try to make marriage the pivotal experience in people’s lives and married love the principal focus of their emotions, obligations, and satisfactions. Despite the stilted language of the era, Victorian marriage harbored all the hopes for romantic love, intimacy, personal fulfillment, and mutual happiness that were to be expressed more openly and urgently during the early

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twentieth century. But these hopes for love and intimacy were continually frustrated by the rigidity of nineteenth-century gender roles.

The people who took idealization of love and intimacy to new heights during the nineteenth century did not intend to shake up marriage or unleash a new preoccupation with sexual gratification. They meant to strengthen marriage by encouraging husbands and wives to weave new emotional bonds. In the long run, however, they weakened it. The focus on romantic love eventually undercut the doctrine of separate spheres for men and women and the ideal of female purity, putting new strains on the institution of marriage.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries even the most enthusiastic advocates of love matches had believed that love developed after one had selected a suitable prospective mate. People didn't *fall* in love. They *tiptoed* into it. Love, wrote Benjamin Franklin, "is changeable, transient, and accidental. But Friendship and Esteem are derived from Principles of Reason and Thought."<sup>1</sup>

During the nineteenth century, however, young people started to believe that love was far more sublime and far less reasoned than mutual esteem. In 1819, Catharine Sedgwick, later one of the most successful nineteenth-century American champions of domesticity, wrote to her brother announcing she had just broken off her engagement because her esteem for her fiancé had not blossomed into love. "I am degraded in my own opinion," Sedgwick wrote, "but I cannot help it. It is strange but it is impossible for me to create a sentiment of tenderness by any process of reasoning, or any effort of gratitude."

Over the next several years fewer and fewer people were to see anything "strange" in the idea that falling in love, or failing to do so, was something that you "cannot help." Just six years later Sedgwick noted in her diary that she had been naive about the mystery of love. "Not knowing quite as much . . . as I [now] do, I fancied that liking might ripen into something warmer." People were starting to believe that the heart had a mind of its own.<sup>2</sup>

And as the century wore on, lovers became ever more eager to obey its will, embracing the romantic excesses that earlier generations had warned against. In 1840 the novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote to his fiancée, Sophia Peabody, "[W]here thou art not, there it is a sort of death." Albert Janin wrote to his girlfriend in 1871: "I kissed your letter over and over again, regardless of the smallpox epidemic at New York, and gave myself up to a carnival of bliss before breaking the envelope." A few months later Janin declared: "I cannot have a separate existence from you. I breathe by you; I live by you."<sup>3</sup>

Surprisingly, women's letters were usually less effusive than men's, perhaps because a woman's reputation suffered more if she expressed her love to

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a man she ended up not marrying. Gradually, however, women stopped fearing romantic love as "a dangerous amusement" and instead found in falling in love the kind of self-fulfillment that the previous generation had sought in religious revivals.<sup>4</sup>

Just as conservatives of the late eighteenth century had warned, this intensification of romantic love encouraged couples to be so "taken up with each other" that the lover or spouse rivalled God in people's affections. In 1863, Annie Fields wrote to her husband: "Thou art my church and thou my book of palms." Charles Strong actually called his fiancée "the Idol of my heart" and described sitting in church feeling like "a new being just made," not because he had been reborn in Christ but because he had fallen in love. In colonial days such "idolatry" might have gotten him expelled from the church.<sup>5</sup>

Yet the exaltation of romantic love also made some people, especially women, more hesitant to marry. Many nineteenth-century women went through a "marriage trauma," worrying about what would happen if a spouse did not live up to their high ideals. Such disparate characters as Catharine Sedgwick, the great defender of domesticity, and Susan B. Anthony, the future leader of the woman suffrage movement, had recurrent nightmares about marrying unworthy men. In the end neither ever married. Rates of lifelong singlehood, which had fallen in the eighteenth century, rose again in America and Britain as the century wore on. "Better single than miserably married" was a popular catchphrase in that era, and women repeated it to one another when they became discouraged in their search for romance.<sup>6</sup>

The insistence that marriage must be based on true love also implied that it was immoral to marry for any other reason. In the 1790s, ladies' debating societies in England had posed the question: Which was worse, love without money in a marriage or money without love? Novelists such as Jane Austen usually skirted the issue by arranging for their female characters to find love and financial security in the same man. But for nonfiction writers, the contradictions between the goal of marrying for love and the practical need to find a male provider could lead to some surprisingly radical critiques of marriage. The British social commentator Harriet Martineau wrote that although marriage was an institution "designed to protect the sanctity of love," it had become the means of destroying love, because so many women were forced into marriage merely to survive.<sup>7</sup>

In 1850 the French journalist Jeanne Deroin was put on trial in France for her "inflamed opinions" about love and marriage. According to the court transcript, Deroin declared: "It has been said that I was dreaming of promiscuity. Heavens, nothing has ever been further from my thought. On the con-

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tary, what I dream of . . . [is] a social state in which marriage will be purified, made moral and egalitarian, according to the precepts laid down by God himself. What I want is to transform the institution of marriage which is so full of imperfections—" At this point the judge interrupted, saying, "I cannot let you go on. You are attacking one of the most respectable of all institutions."<sup>8</sup>

But, many people wondered, what was so respectable about entering a loveless marriage? Conversely, how could an economically dependent woman truly choose a love match? In England the radical journalist W. R. Greg shocked respectable society by arguing in an 1850 article in the *Westminster Review* that antiprostitution campaigners were only chipping away at the tip of an iceberg. For every woman who sold herself to a client, Greg asserted, ten sold themselves to a husband. "The barter is as naked and as cold in the one case as the other; the thing bartered is the same; the difference between the two transactions lies in the price that is paid down."<sup>9</sup>

Even moderate reformers began to reject the idea that a "fallen" woman should redeem herself by getting her seducer to "make an honest woman of her." Wrote James Beard Talbot: "What a withering sarcasm upon our ethical notions is contained in that coarse expression. If the poor girl can induce or compel the man who has betrayed her to swear a lie of fidelity to her at the altar," he complained, "then, on that hard condition, and on that only, can her character be whitewashed. The pardon of society is granted or withheld, according as she can or cannot obtain a legal hold on her betrayer!"<sup>10</sup>

As had been foreshadowed in the late eighteenth century, the insistence that marriage be based on true love and companionship spurred some to call for further liberalization of divorce laws. The strongest proponents of the love match in Europe, Canada, and the United States were also the greatest champions of loosening restrictions on divorce. To them, a loveless union was immoral and ought to be dissolved without dishonor. The strongest opponents of divorce in the nineteenth century were traditionalists who disliked the exaltation of married love. They feared that making married love the center of people's emotional lives would raise divorce rates, and they turned out to be right.<sup>11</sup>

As the ideal of marital intimacy spread, judges became more sympathetic on a case-by-case basis to couples who sought divorce, and many countries liberalized their legal codes. In America, fewer than half the states had accepted cruelty as a reason for divorce before 1840, and the cruelty had to be extreme. But after 1840 cruelty began to be defined more loosely, and by 1860 a majority of states also allowed divorce in case of habitual drunkenness. Divorce also became significantly easier in Canada and most countries of Western Eu-

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rope. The French Revolution's legalization of divorce, which Napoleon had revoked in 1816, was reinstated in 1884.<sup>12</sup>

The United States was simultaneously a world leader in embracing the ideals of married romance and a world leader in divorce rates. Between 1880 and 1890 it experienced a 70 percent increase in divorce. In 1891 a Cornell University professor made the preposterous prediction that if trends in the second half of the nineteenth century continued, by 1980 more marriages would end by divorce than by death. As it turned out, he was off by only ten years!<sup>13</sup>

The Victorian elevation of the love match had yet another destabilizing effect on traditional marriage. Intense emotional bonds between husband and wife undermined the gender hierarchy of the home. Although most men still believed they were the rightful heads of their households, they became more likely to exert their control through love and consent than by coercion. Hawthorne expected his "dove" Sophia "to follow my guidance and do my bidding." But, he added, "I possess this power only so far as I love you," and his goal was simply "to toil for thee, and to make thee a happy wife." Lincoln Clark assured his wife that he wished to command her heart, not her will.<sup>14</sup>

Some husbands went so far as to renounce their legal rights formally. One such pioneer was the philosopher John Stuart Mill, who married Harriet Taylor in 1851. Many antislavery activists in the United States thought long and hard about how to establish egalitarian marriages that were untainted by any resemblance between the "master" of the family and the master of the plantation. Women's rights activist Lucy Stone and her husband, Henry Blackwell, wrote their own marriage vows, declaring that in entering "the sacred relationship of husband and wife," they intended to disobey all laws that "refuse to recognize the wife as an independent rational being [and] confer upon the husband an injurious and unnatural superiority." The 1850s saw a revival of a women's rights movement in North America and much of Western Europe, with reform of marriage laws at the top of its agenda.<sup>15</sup>

Many nineteenth-century women felt that their own marriages were based on mutual consideration, despite their husbands' legal authority over them. Elizabeth Elny, an English critic of Victorian gender roles, led an unsuccessful fight to make marital rape a crime and to win wives' right to control their own property. Despite her failures in the legal and political realm, she believed that in individual homes across the land, love was already breaking down the barriers to equality that lawyers and politicians still defended. "In every happy home the change is complete. There no husband claims supremacy, and no wife surrenders her conscience and her will. There the true unity, that of deep and lasting affection . . . reigns alone."<sup>16</sup>

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Elmy's enthusiasm was premature. In most households husbands still wielded ultimate supremacy and wives usually surrendered their will. But optimists like Elmy had good reason to believe that further change was in the air. And conservatives had good reason to fear it.

Even the accepted wisdom that females were more pure and moral than men could subvert male domination, giving women an entrée into the political sphere through a different route from that proposed by feminists in the 1790s. Ascribing morality almost exclusively to women had been used to justify their confinement to domesticity as a way of protecting them from the wickedness of the world. But it inspired some women to demand access to political rights, not because they were men's equals but because they were in fact their moral betters.

Women who accepted the ideals of separate spheres for males and females could be remarkably scathing in condemning the moral failures of the "so-called braver sex." In the 1830s, the New York Female Moral Reform Society, arguing "that the licentious male is no less guilty than his victims," started publishing the names of men whom they deemed guilty of sexual immorality. "We think it proper even to expose names, for the same reason that the names of thieves and robbers are published, that the public may know them and govern themselves accordingly."<sup>17</sup>

Even the temperance movement, which began as an attempt to pull men out of taverns and send them home to their wives, became political. Within a few decades many of its leaders began to argue that because women were more refined and civilized than men, they needed to extend the values of the home beyond the parlor and into the streets. By the late nineteenth century, women reformers were asserting that females should apply their housekeeping skills to society and sweep away the evils of the world.<sup>18</sup>

Beneath the middle-class celebration of the sanctity of marriage and female purity, then, there were potent forces for change in Victorian marriage and gender roles. Thoughtful observers of the day worried that the seeming stability of marriage and male-female relations was a facade. Lydia Maria Child, a courageous antislavery activist and radical proponent of racial integration, declined to join any movement to reform marriage, fearing that such changes might shake the very foundations of civilization. As she declared in 1856, "I am so well aware that society stands over a heaving volcano, from which it is separated by the thinnest possible crust of appearances, that I am afraid to speak or even think on the subject."<sup>19</sup>

The volcano heaved, but it did not yet erupt. Most women, including feminists, married. Women who remained single did not try to exercise the

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same prerogatives as men. Indeed, many of them, like Catharine Sedgwick, made their livings writing about the joys of domesticity. The idea of complete equality between men and women, either in marriage or in public life, garnered little support. And the divorce rates that so shocked contemporaries seem ludicrously small by today's standards: In 1900 there were just 0.7 divorces per thousand people in the United States, while in Europe, most countries had fewer than 0.2 divorces per thousand.<sup>20</sup>

One reason that rising expectations about love and marriage did not pierce through the thin crust of surface stability was that these ideals were still confined to a relatively small segment of the population, the most well-published group, to be sure, but not the most representative. Even those who most enthusiastically embraced the goal of achieving happiness through marriage had not yet discarded many of the older values and social constraints that were hostile to the full pursuit of marital happiness. The Victorians did not have some secret formula, since lost, about how to expect the best of marriage and still put up with the worst. Rather, they were much more accepting than we are today of a huge gap between rhetoric and reality, expectation and actual experience. In large part, this was because they had no other choice.

Despite society's abstract glorification of romance and married love, the day-to-day experience of marital intimacy was still quite circumscribed compared to the standards that would prevail in the twentieth century. These limits kept the institution of marriage and the relations between the sexes stable in the nineteenth century. Only when those limits were overcome did people discover just how thin a crust separated Victorian marital ideals from an explosion of new expectations about love, gender roles, and marriage.

Although the relationship between husband and wife was romanticized in the nineteenth century in ways that would have horrified seventeenth-century Protestants and Catholics alike, ongoing commitments to parents and siblings prevented the nuclear family from becoming completely private. Obligations to distant kin had weakened dramatically since the Middle Ages, but husbands and wives felt stronger ties to their birth families than they would in the twentieth century. Nineteenth-century advice books waxed as lyrical about the sentimental bonds between brothers and sisters as those between husbands and wives. The unmarried sister or widowed mother who lived contentedly with a married couple was a standard figure in Victorian novels.

In actual life, moreover, the percentage of households containing parents or unmarried siblings *increased* during the nineteenth century before declining again in the twentieth. Historian Steven Ruggles points out that this increase was most notable among families where economic necessity was not at

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work, suggesting that including members of one partner's birth family in the married couple's home remained a cultural ideal.<sup>21</sup>

Another limit on intimate marriage in the nineteenth century was that many people still held the Enlightenment view that love developed slowly out of admiration, respect, and appreciation of someone's good character. Coupled with the taboos on expressions of sexual desire, these values meant that the love one felt for a sweetheart often was not seen as qualitatively different from the feeling one might have for a sister, a friend, or even an idea. The 1828 edition of Webster's dictionary defined love as an "affection of the mind" that is "excited by beauty or worth . . . [or] by pleasing qualities of any kind, as by kindness, benevolence, charity." The first definition of *love* as a verb was "to be pleased with, to regard with affection. We love a man who has done us a favor."<sup>22</sup>

As the century wore on, such sedate definitions of *love* lost favor. But the conviction that men and women had inherently different natures remained an impediment to the intensification of romantic love and intimacy. While the doctrine of difference made men and women complementary figures who could be completed only by marriage, it also drove a wedge between them. Many people felt much closer to their own sex than to what was seen as the literally "opposite"—and alien—sex.

In letters and diaries, women often referred to men as "the grosser sex." In 1863, Lucy Gilmer Breckinridge confided to her diary her fear that she could "never learn to love any man" and lamented, "Oh what I would not give for a *wife*!" Some men "are *right* good," she conceded, but on the whole, "women are so lovely, so angelic, what a pity they have to unite their fates with such coarse brutal creatures as men."<sup>23</sup> Men repeatedly noted how much easier it was to talk to other males than to women, and their journals often expressed the worry that being married to an angel might not be as easy as it sounded.

Because the sexual aspect of a person's identity was so much more muted than it later became, intense friendships with a person of the same sex were common and raised no eyebrows. People did not pick up the sexual connotations that often make even the most innocent expression of affection seem sexual to our sensibilities today. Perfectly respectable nineteenth-century women wrote to each other in terms like these: "[T]he expectation once more to see your face again, makes me feel hot and feverish." They carved their initials into trees, set flowers in front of one another's portraits, danced together, kissed, held hands, and endured intense jealousies over rivals or small slights.<sup>24</sup>

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Quasi-romantic friendships also existed among men, although unlike women's friendships, they generally ended at marriage. While they lasted, male friendships included much more physical contact and emotional intensity than most heterosexual men are comfortable with today. James Blake, for example, noted from time to time in his diary that he and his friend, while roommates, shared a bed. "We retired early," he recorded one day in 1851, "and in each other's arms did friendship sink peacefully to sleep." Such behavior did not bother the fiancée of Blake's roommate a bit.<sup>25</sup>

In Herman Melville's novel *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael first meets the harpooner Queequeg when they have to share a bed at an inn. Ishmael awakens in the morning to find "Queequeg's arm thrown over me in the most loving and affectionate manner. You had almost thought I had been his wife." Only at the end of the nineteenth century did physical expressions of affection between men begin to be interpreted as "homosexual," and only in the early 1900s did ardent woman-to-woman bonds start to seem deviant.<sup>26</sup>

Nineteenth-century Victorians knew that active sexual relations between two people of the same sex did occur. In 1846, a New York policeman, Edward McCosker, was accused of lewdly touching a man's private parts. But a colleague came to his defense, saying that he had "been in the habit of sleeping with said McCosker for the last three months," and that McCosker had never "acted indecent or indelicate." So despite general condemnation of outright homosexual acts, the acceptance of same-sex affection as normal allowed a more diffuse intimacy for heterosexual men and women than became possible in the twentieth century.<sup>27</sup>

But the biggest single obstacle to making personal happiness the foremost goal of marriage was that women needed to marry in order to survive. Jane Austen wrote to her niece that "anything is to be preferred or endured rather than marrying without affection." But, she added, "single women have a dreadful propensity for being poor—which is one very strong argument in favor of Matrimony."<sup>28</sup>

Single women could rarely support themselves living on their own for more than a few years at a time, much less save for their old age. Many women saw marriage as the only alternative to destitution or prostitution or, even in the best case, genteel dependence on relatives. In the absence of job security and pensions, a woman who was not married by her thirties generally had to move in with relatives. Sentimental novels aside, this was not always an idyllic life.

The need for economic security and the desire for a home of her own tempered many a Victorian woman's romantic dreams and led her to settle for a marriage that promised less intimacy and mutual respect than she might



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have hoped for. Not until the late twentieth century did a majority of women tell pollsters that love outweighed all other considerations in choosing a partner. For men too, romantic love had to be moderated by practical calculations, so long as their careers and credit depended upon how neighbors, kin, banks, employers, and the community at large assessed their respectability.

Once a Victorian woman entered marriage, she was still legally subordinate to her husband, and this too acted to keep individualistic aspirations in check. There was a remarkable continuity in the legal subjugation of women from the Middle Ages until the end of the nineteenth century. In the thirteenth century the English jurist Henry de Bracton declared that a married couple is one person, and that person is the husband. When Lord William Blackstone codified English common law in 1765, he reaffirmed this principle. Upon marriage, he explained, "the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended." Blackstone noted that "a man cannot grant anything to his wife, or enter into covenant with her, for the grant would be to suppose her separate existence." This doctrine of coverture, in which the legal identity of a wife was subsumed ("covered") by that of her husband, was passed on to the colonies and became the basis of American law for the next 150 years.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the tendency of the new marital ideals to mitigate male dominance in practice, the Victorians stoutly resisted the expansion of women's rights, fearing that giving women "a fancied equality with men" would threaten marriage. In 1857 an English publication, the *Saturday Review*, declared: "Men do not like, and would not seek, to mate with an independent factor, who at any time could quit . . . the tedious duties of training and bringing up children, and keeping the tradesmen's bills, and mending the linen, for the more lucrative returns of the desk or counter." The editors concluded that society should discourage the development of any type of woman who was not "*entirely dependent on man* as well for subsistence as for protection and love."<sup>30</sup>

Women might ask their protectors for favors, polite society believed, and decent husbands would oblige them. But demanding rights was quite another matter. Women had no choice but to wheedle for the concessions they were granted in family life. For example, the new nineteenth-century preference for granting maternal custody of children in a divorce, says legal scholar Michael Grossberg, "remained a discretionary policy . . . [that] could be easily revoked any time a mother did not meet the standards of maternal conduct decreed by judicial patriarchs."<sup>31</sup>

Even the liberalized divorce laws of the nineteenth century retained a powerful double standard. The 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act in Britain allowed any husband to get a divorce on grounds of a wife's adultery. But for a woman

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to get a divorce, she had to prove not just adultery but an additional "matrimonial offense," such as desertion or cruelty.<sup>32</sup>

The preservation of male dominance even undercut the doctrine that it was a man's duty to protect and revere his wife. Though marital coercion and violence were increasingly condemned in the nineteenth century, progress in actually protecting wives from battering was extremely limited. Indeed, the sanctity of the home protected the batterer. In 1874 the North Carolina Supreme Court rejected the traditional view that a wife's "provocation" was an acceptable defense against assault charges. But, said the court, punishing the wife beater was not an appropriate response to the crime. It was "better to draw the curtain, shut out the public gaze, and leave the parties to forgive and forget."<sup>33</sup>

Many Victorian women were sincerely cherished by their husbands. But their ultimate well-being depended on his goodwill. Women had to adjust their expectations and desires to the reality that they had few rights in marriage and few options outside it. The main reason nineteenth-century marriages seem so much less conflicted than modern ones is that women kept their aspirations in check and swallowed their disappointments. The English domestic advice writer Sarah Ellis put the issue bluntly. A wife, she said, "should place herself, instead of running the risk of *being placed*, in a secondary position."<sup>34</sup>

Such ideas still have their proponents. In 1999 the neoconservative William Kristol, who has made a lucrative career out of relishing nineteenth-century ideas, argued that modern women must move "beyond women's liberation to grasp the following three points: the necessity of marriage, the importance of good morals, and the necessity of inequality within marriage."<sup>35</sup> Most nineteenth-century men and women would have agreed, though they might have more delicately substituted the word *difference* for *inequality*.

The "good morals" of Victorian women and the inequality of Victorian gender roles did indeed make most marriages in that era stable, although desertion, unofficial divorce, and therefore technical bigamy were not uncommon in some social groups. But the economic, legal, and ideological forces that limited people's individualist aspirations and maintained the stability of most marriages also had some very problematic consequences for people's personal lives and created a great deal of discontent under the surface. The principle that each sex supplies what the other lacks, for example, could turn courtship and marriage into a meeting of two gender stereotypes rather than two individuals. A prospective partner was judged against a gender yardstick that left little room for individual deviation from "manly" or "womanly"

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conventions. It was the idea of Woman, not actual women in their variety and individuality, that was cherished. Writing in 1839, Francis J. Grund, a German immigrant to America, commented that the sanctification of womanhood in the United States was very shallow. "Whenever an American gentleman meets a lady, he looks upon her as a representative of her sex; and it is to her sex, not to her peculiar amiable qualities, that she is indebted for his attentions."<sup>36</sup>

A woman who didn't conform to the conventions of femininity was ineligible for its privileges and was often considered fair game for abuse. A man who couldn't conform to the middle-class ideal of the male provider also lost his standing. In earlier generations a man whose wife worked for pay could call on positive images of marriage as a union of yoke mates, or proudly see himself as the head of the family workforce. But a Victorian middle-class man in that situation was likely to believe that he had lost his manhood. Unemployment or business failure was a direct threat to his personal identity as well as to his family's subsistence. "I may be a man one day and a mouse the next," complained a British seed merchant who had experienced economic reverses.<sup>37</sup>

To "be a man," a husband had to rule his household. Victorians might laud the wife's role as "moral mistress," but it was a withering insult to describe a household as being under "petticoat government." Now, however, unlike the past, men were expected to *inspire* rather than to extort submission. In the absence of women's voluntary deference, husbands could still resort to force, and often did, but the exercise of physical force no longer had the social support and respectability that it once had had. Male identity was precariously poised between not being able to assert supremacy at all and being too inclined to assert it by force.

The rigid separation between men's and women's spheres made it hard for couples to share their innermost dreams, no matter how much in love they were. The ideal of intimacy was continually undermined in practice by the reality of the different constraints on men and women, leading to a "sense of estrangement" between many husbands and wives. Often the odes to family and domesticity in people's diaries and letters were totally abstract, without any reference to the distinctive characteristics of one's own particular family. One man reared in a Victorian family later complained that home and family were more a "*feeling* of togetherness" than a place "of actual interaction."<sup>38</sup>

The definition of men as providers and women as dependents also laid the groundwork for outright resentment on both sides. Women wrote of weeping with loneliness after yet another day alone in the house. For their part, men could be excused for thinking that wives acted almost like the

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agents of employers, making sure their husbands kept their shoulders to the grindstone. "If all is well at home we need not watch him at the market," a nineteenth-century writer opined. "One will work cheerfully for small profit if he be rich in the love and society of the home." Henry Ward Beecher believed that female dependence, along with debt, was a useful form of social discipline: "[I]f a young man will only get in debt for some land, and then get married, these two things will keep him straight, or nothing will."<sup>39</sup>

An 1834 essay explicitly described how marriage was a bulwark against labor unrest: "When his proud heart would resent the language of petty tyrants . . . from whom he receives the scanty remuneration for his daily labors, the thought that she perhaps may suffer thereby, will calm the tumult of his passions, and bid him struggle on, and find his reward in her sweet tones . . ."<sup>40</sup>

A man with any tendency to chafe against the burdens of marriage could have found ample justification in one domestic advice author's surprisingly *unself-sacrificing* exhortation to wives: "[E]njoy the luxuries of wealth, without enduring the labors to acquire it; and the honors of office, without feeling its cares; and the glory of victory, without suffering the dangers of battle."<sup>41</sup>

By the last decades of the nineteenth century there was considerable resentment among some men about the obligations of marriage. Why, demanded one British writer, should a man take on "the fetters of a wife, the burden and responsibility of children" and be tied down to "the decent monotony of the domestic hearth"? In this period, a "bachelor" subculture emerged in Western Europe and North America as some men rebelled against these constraints.<sup>42</sup>

While the doctrine of difference inhibited emotional intimacy, the cult of female purity in particular made physical intimacy even more problematic. Some Victorian husbands and wives developed satisfactory, even joyful sex lives. But in many cases couples could not escape the ideal of passionlessness. According to the cult of true womanhood, only men had sexual desires, but they were supposed to combat their "carnal" urges. Most men took this injunction seriously, and diaries of the day record their prodigious struggles to control their impulses. Many men patronized prostitutes (often seeing this as a lesser evil than masturbation), but they rarely did so without guilt. As one middle-class man recalled, he "learned to associate amorous ardors with the vulgar . . . and to dissociate them sharply from romance."<sup>43</sup>

The cult of female purity created a huge distinction in men's minds between good sex and "good" women. Many men could not even think about a woman they respected in sexual terms. One man wrote to his fiancée, "When I tried to tell you how I love you, I thought I was a kind of criminal



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and felt just a little as though I were confessing some wrong I had done you." The doctrine of domesticity also blurred the distinction between wife and mother, adding to a man's ambivalence about "subjecting" his wife to sex.<sup>44</sup>

For many women brought up with the idea that normal females should lack sexual passion, the wedding night was a source of anxiety or even disgust. In the 1920s, Katharine Davis interviewed twenty-two hundred American women, most of them born before 1890. Fully a quarter said they had initially been "repelled" by the experience of sex. Even women who did enjoy sex with their husbands reported feeling guilt or shame about their pleasure, believing that "immoderate" passion during the sex act was degrading.<sup>45</sup>

Many men also found it unnatural if a woman enjoyed sex "too much." Frederick Rymen, who in the 1880s wrote frankly and joyfully about his sexual encounters with prostitutes, was taken aback when any woman took the initiative during sex. He described one young prostitute as a "little charmer" but commented, "I usually prefer to have a woman lie perfectly quiet when I am enjoying a vigil. This 'playing up' is not agreeable to me but she was truly one of the finest little armfuls of feminine voluptuousness I ever yet laid on the top of."<sup>46</sup>

Of course many women *did* have sexual urges, and the struggle to repress them led to other problems. Victorian women suffered from an epidemic of ailments that were almost certainly associated with sexual frustration. They flocked to hydrotherapy centers, where strong volleys of water sometimes relieved their symptoms. Physicians regularly massaged women's pelvic areas to alleviate "hysteria," a word derived from the Greek word for womb. Medical textbooks of the day make it clear that these doctors brought their patients to orgasm. In fact, the mechanical vibrator was invented at the end of the nineteenth century to relieve physicians of this tedious and time-consuming chore!<sup>47</sup>

The more sexuality was repressed, and the more emphasis was placed on its forbidden qualities, the more preoccupied with it some people became. Victorian society saw an explosion of pornography and prostitution that could not be concealed by restricting whorehouses and pornographic bookstores to the most unsavory sections of town. By the end of the nineteenth century venereal disease was a serious problem for many middle-class men and their unsuspecting wives.<sup>48</sup>

The marriage of Mary and Edward Benson illustrates the sexual tensions that could fester below the surface of an outwardly conventional Victorian marriage. From their wedding night in 1859, their sexual relationship was a disaster, and it never improved over the course of the marriage. Describing her honeymoon in Paris, Mary later wrote, "How I cried . . . The nights! I

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can't think how I lived." For the next ten years she blamed herself for not being able to match her husband's "strong human passion."<sup>49</sup>

When Mary finally did discover her own passion, it was in a lesbian relationship that involved full sexual consummation. Yet she and Edward stayed married. As far as we know, he followed his religious principles and refused to seek any other outlet for his sexual energies, including masturbation. He fell into moods of deep depression, and Mary grappled with her guilt about not being able to comfort him. "I never feel my own want of womanliness so much as when he is in trouble or ill," she wrote in her diary.

Mary and Edward Benson's incompatibilities and disappointments were, if not typical, far from rare. By the end of the century some reformers had begun to promote sex as a desirable part of marriage that ought to give pleasure to both parties. In the early twentieth century a whole new genre of sex education and advice manuals appeared. The immediate, heartfelt response to these books speaks to the pent-up frustrations of people who had been reared on Victorian ideas about sexuality and marriage.

When Marie Stopes published *Married Love: A New Contribution to the Solution of Sex Difficulties* in England in 1918, a middle-aged husband with considerable premarital experience wrote to thank her for teaching him that a "good" woman, like a "bad" one, might have sexual needs of her own: "But for your advice I should not have hazarded preliminaries for fear of shocking my wife and giving her the feeling that I was treating her as a mistress." Another man asked whether fondling was "too indecent to the nicely minded woman." An older man thanked Stopes on behalf of the new generation of men, reporting that when he married, he had been so ignorant about female sexuality that when his wife had an orgasm, he "was frightened and thought it was some sort of fit."<sup>50</sup>

But even before these new manuals brought comfort and release to so many individuals, other changes in economic and political life were pushing the boundaries of Victorian norms. The rapid progress of industrialization, urbanization, and political reform in the late nineteenth century only exacerbated the strains on the system of gender segregation and the cult of female purity.

## Challenges to Victorian Marriage

Since early in the nineteenth century young men who got jobs in the cities had been establishing a social life that was not controlled by parents, kin,

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church, community leaders, or employers. Until the last decades of the century, however, young women who joined the labor force generally lived in more closely supervised settings, such as boardinghouses, or as servants in their employers' homes. Men who wanted premarital sex or even unsupervised evenings with young women in this period had to consort with prostitutes in the red-light districts that existed in virtually every city in Europe and America.

But gradually young working-class women also began to gain more freedom from adult supervision. Throughout Western Europe and America, clerical and service jobs proliferated, giving lower-class women alternatives to domestic service and middle-class women more respectable places to work or shop outside the home. The percentage of working women employed as domestic servants fell sharply in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. By 1900 one-fifth of urban working women were living on their own, and these young women could socialize with men in lunchrooms, dance halls, cabarets, or the new amusement parks that were springing up near urban areas.

By the late nineteenth century many working-class youths were rejecting the segregation of the sexes and the ideal of female modesty. Some working girls found a middle ground between prostitution and seclusion. Contemporary reformers labeled them "charity girls"—girls who gave away sexual favors for treats, gifts, or an evening's entertainment. But to the surprise of reformers, these young women were not interested in the "rescue" missions that they organized. Within their own circles their behavior did not hurt their marriageability.<sup>51</sup>

Behavior patterns in the middle class were also changing. In the late nineteenth century middle-class girls began to attend high school in growing numbers. These young women developed habits and skills that made it hard for them to adjust to their mothers' circumscribed domestic lives when school was over. Many of them aspired to work outside the home before marriage or to pursue higher education. In the United States, there were forty thousand women in college in 1880, representing a third of all students. The number of women attending college tripled between 1890 and 1910.<sup>52</sup>

As more young middle-class women became department store clerks, typists, or government employees, some reformers complained that even these "respectable" young women socialized with men at work, allowed men to "treat" them at public establishments, and went unchaperoned with male companions to amusement parks or cabarets. But as other reformers got to understand the lives of working girls better, many broke the conventions of ladylike

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behavior themselves, joining the picket lines when working women demanded safer work conditions or higher pay. It was getting hard to tell the "good" woman from the "bad," at least by the standards that had been in place just fifty years earlier.

The increasing freedom of commercial life also undermined sexual reticence in the late nineteenth century. By the 1880s rubbers, "womb veils" (diaphragms), chemical suppositories, douches, and vaginal sponges were widely available in Europe and North America, and abortionists openly advertised their services. One doctor complained that enterprising entrepreneurs scoured the papers for wedding announcements and sent birth control advertisements to the new brides. Scandalized conservatives tried to roll back the availability of birth control. In America, the Comstock Law of 1873 outlawed any medicine or article used for contraception or abortion and made it a crime to advertise such devices. In the long run, however, these campaigns could not reverse women's expanding access to birth control. In fact, the controversy over these issues helped break the silence that had until then surrounded sexuality.<sup>53</sup>

The growing women's rights movement weighed in with its critique of male-female relations. Although the movement was primarily focused on winning women the right to vote, by the 1880s a radical wing was insisting that thousands of women were trapped in repressive marriages. In England, Mona Caird shocked readers of the *Daily Telegraph* in 1888, when she claimed that the institution of marriage was an invasion of women's personal liberty. In two months the paper received twenty-seven thousand letters, pro and con, leading the editor to cut off all further discussion. Henrik Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* made another radical critique of marriage. First performed in Copenhagen in 1879, the play's ending, in which Nora leaves her family to find the self-fulfillment denied her as a wife, outraged most critics. Yet it played to packed audiences all across Europe during the 1890s (although Ibsen bowed to pressure and changed the ending for the German production).<sup>54</sup>

In England, the case of Emily Hall and Edward Jackson spurred a radical transformation in traditional marriage law. Hall and Jackson had married in 1887 but lived together for only a few days before she returned to her family. In 1889 Jackson got a court order against Hall for "restitution of conjugal rights." Emily simply ignored the order because five years earlier Parliament had abolished penalties for spouses who refused to grant conjugal rights. In 1891 the frustrated Jackson kidnapped his erstwhile wife on her way home from church. Emily's family immediately took Edward to court to win her

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freedom. A lower court ruled in Jackson's favor, on the traditional grounds that a husband was entitled to custody over his wife. The Court of Appeal, however, reversed the decision, holding that no English subject could be imprisoned by another, even if he was her husband.<sup>55</sup>

Responding to the ruling, feminist Elizabeth Elmy wrote ecstatically to a friend, "Let us rejoice together . . . coverture is dead and buried." Writing from an opposing viewpoint, antiwoman's rights journalist Eliza Lynn Fulton complained that the Court of Appeal had "suddenly abolished [marriage] one fine morning!"<sup>56</sup>

As it turned out, Elmy's hopes and Fulton's fears were premature. Most governments in Europe and most states and provinces in North America retained "head and master" laws that allowed husbands to make family decisions without consulting their wives right up until the 1970s. Still, improvements in women's legal status continued to accumulate in the 1880s and 1890s, and the women's rights movement gained converts as the century drew to an end.<sup>57</sup>

Even women who had spent most of their lives celebrating woman's special sphere began to endorse the demand for political rights and personal freedoms. Frances Willard had become a leader of the temperance movement because of her commitment to domesticity: She hated alcohol because it pulled men away from their duties to wives, children, and home. In time, however, she came to believe that women needed the vote. At age fifty-three she published a book describing the joys of learning how to ride a bicycle, even though, she told her readers, just ten years earlier she would have found the idea of engaging in such unladylike activity horrifying.<sup>58</sup>

"We have got the new woman in everything except the counting of her vote at the ballot box," commented suffragist Susan B. Anthony in 1895. "And that's coming."

The "protectors" of women's special sphere reacted to these changes with near hysteria. Physicians claimed that bicycle riding was a woman's first step down the road to sexual abandon. In 1890 the British anthropologist James Allen predicted that granting married women the vote would lead to "social revolution, disruption of domestic ties, desecration of marriage, destruction of the household gods, dissolution of the family." In 1895, James Weir warned readers of the *American Naturalist* that establishment of equal rights would lead directly to "that abyss of immoral horrors so repugnant to our cultivated ethical tastes—the matriarchate."<sup>59</sup>

When women finally got the vote in England after World War I, the editor of the *Saturday Review* called it a form of treason. "While the men of England were abroad dying by the hundreds of thousands for the preservation of

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England," he charged, Parliament "handed over the government of England to the women . . . who were living at home in ease. Surely valour and suffering and death never had a poorer reward."

But by that time traditional patriarchal powers had been under siege for two decades, and the system of gender segregation was already crumbling. A new woman was indeed entering the scene. Whether she was marching in a suffrage demonstration, shedding her corset to pedal her bicycle down a country lane, working or shopping at the huge new department stores in the cities, or decorously demanding sex education for her daughter, the New Woman was stepping off the pedestal of homebound domesticity and female purity. Many observers believed that the thin crust separating society from "the heaving volcano" of marriage and gender tensions was on the verge of collapse. And they were right.